The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program

Foreign Service Spouse Series

JOAN WILSON

Interviewed by: Margaret Sullivan

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Note: Joan Wilson was associated with spouse training at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) for twelve years.She bagan her career in 1968 as co-cordinator (with Dorothy Stansbury) of the Wives' Course, which later became the Family Workshop as male spouses entered the Service. Mrs. Wilson serves as coordinator form 1975-1980, and during that time established the Information Center which is now part of the Overseas Briefing Center at FSI.

Mrs. Wilson's interview is primatily a discussion of her philosophy on spouse training and other aspectrs of Foreign Service life.

Q: Joan, how did you first hear about the Foreign Service.

WILSON: As a student, I thought of the Foreign Service as all Americans do, as a rather glamorous form of public commitment. I first thought I'd like to be in the Foreign Service when I was in college. I majored in Latin American history and had a marvelous professor named Charles Griffin, who was a Latin American cultural historian. He made that part of the world so real and exciting that I thought, "That's where I'd like to have a career." This student experience was amplified by living with a Mexican family for a summer, and the wonderful feeling of being at home in another country, and feeling a great deal of affection for Mexico whetted that interest.

Q: Is there a year?

WILSON: It must have been my senior year in high school when I first went to Mexico. Then my freshman year in college - 1942 - I stayed with a Mexican family who later became friends of my parents. It was a very tidy little circle. When I finished college, I was recruited by a Rockefeller-founded-and-financed organization called The Institute for Public Affairs, which brought every year 50 young people from across the country to Washington in hopes of persuading young students to be attracted to public service. Because the war was on at this point there weren't the usual number of male candidates, so a large number of females, for the first time, were recruited to spend a remarkable nine months in Washington. Females lived at the Margery Webster School. The boys stayed at the Brookings Institute, which was then on Lafayette Square. We spent three months doing interviewing and enjoying senior government officials - Congressmen, the Secretary of State, Supreme Court Justices, etc. The last six months we were allowed to do an internship in any part of the government we wanted, so I chose to work for Nelson Rockefeller's Coordinator of Inter American Affairs. I worked two months as a feature writer, two months as a radio writer, and two months in the film division. Then I was offered a job at the end of my internship, to stay on working in films, which I did. Our task was to select documentary films made by American business firms that were suitable for inclusion in overseas exhibition programs. I had the fun of watching movies all day long.

Then I moved to New York, where we had our original production unit and was there for about a year. We made movies for specific overseas audiences to point out the viewpoint of the United States Government. These included wonderful teaching films on health care and public sanitation, education films.

Q: This was just at the end of the war?

WILSON: The end of the war. We had this huge wonderful program in Latin America, Point Four kinds of technical assistance. There was sort of a pre-Peace Corps mentality. It was idealistic, it was gung-ho, it was very intoxicating for a young person eager to learn the world.

Q: Did you have a vision of yourself at that point as a professional woman, or were you marking time, or were you not thinking about that?

WILSON: I've never been a feminist. I never thought in terms of anything but the next unfolding chapter in a very wonderful life. I didn't have long-range goals. I decided not to take the Foreign Service exam because I had a very weak background in economics and the sample exam I looked at had a question that paralyzed me. The question was "Describe the trade policy United States had with Argentina in 1920." I said no way would I know that! At this point my father asked me if I would help him. He was moving to Europe as an independent film producer and said he could use me as an office manager. This was partly a device to end a romance which my parents felt was inappropriate, and their motto always was, "Take the daughters on a trip when they were involved with someone who didn't win parental approval." So off we went to Rome and I enjoyed very much working with my father, a splendid man. Then we moved to Paris where he was making films, and there I ran into an old friend from Washington, my current husband. We had a very rapid three-month courtship in Paris and when we were married I worked for my father until the day before my child was born.

Q: Jim was assigned...

WILSON: Jim was in the Air Force then. He was with a special group known as the Military Facilities Group. Part of their task was negotiating with the allied governments. He'd been in North Africa working on negotiations there and then was transferred to Paris. He was working with a very fine and wonderful person named General Peter Hamilton, a Medal of Honor winner, the grandson of J.P. Morgan, a man with a brilliant war record, just an outstanding human being. We stayed in Paris for four years when Jim transferred out of the military to civilian status.

Q: Was he thinking of the Foreign Service? Were you thinking of the Foreign Service?

WILSON: I think Jim had always had that as a goal but the war intervened. He was very interested in the work he was doing then, which came after law school, a stint in the United Nations working on demilitarization. Then he transferred into this negotiating group. When he came back he was with the Department of Defense in International Security Affairs, then laterally transferred to the Foreign Service. I remember his coming home one day and saying, "What would you think if I transferred to the Foreign Service. You know that's always been something I've wanted to do in view of my China background, and my studies in political science." And my response was, "That's exactly what I would love to have as a life as long as we never get stationed in South Africa." And we never were.

Q: What year was that, Joan?

WILSON: It must have been in the late '50s, maybe '57, '58.

Q: So that this was part of the Wristonization of the Foreign Service?

WILSON: I think Wriston pre-dated it. Jim's military background was in that whole field of politico-military advisory work; and in the ISA part of the Pentagon they worked very, very closely with the State Department.

Q: And in that period of time here in Washington you have been wife and mother and...

WILSON: ...and very involved in cooperative pre-schools.

Q: How many small children at that point.

WILSON: Four.

Q: So that sort of restricted time.

WILSON: The only thing I accomplished in that time, was a manual on how to organize a cooperative pre-school. I remember how difficult that was, getting up at the crack of dawn while the children were still asleep, creeping up to the attic to my typewriter to pound out one more page before the breakfast brouhaha began.

Q: You had four children in five years or something like that?

WILSON: Very close to that. No, it was four children in seven years. But it was a busy, though happy time.

Q: Yes, it's just a very intense time, I should imagine.

WILSON: And very involved with family and immediate community. The broad issues of the world were the only discussion at the dinner table, or over the headlines in the morning.

Q: Where did you go, or did you stay here?

WILSON: We were in Washington all that time. Our first Foreign Service post was to Madrid, and in view of my minor in Spanish, I was ecstatic. Jim's job there was a double-header. He was both Economic Counselor and head of the AID mission. The tragedy was that while we were there they terminated most of the personnel in the AID mission and closed down that program with great personal hardship to the AID people, who were not assured of continued employment. It was very strenuous and painful for that reason. Otherwise, we were very, very happy in Spain. It was a wonderful experience and our fifth child was born there, and because of Jim's AID connection we traveled almost every weekend to visit reforestation, land leveling, water conservation projects all over Spain. It was a wonderful way to get to know a country, to be able to get out of the capital so constantly.

Q: What was it like to be a Foreign Service wife in a European capital in the 1960s?

WILSON: That's a very easy question to answer because it was perfectly glorious. There was no security problem to begin with. There was no shortage of foodstuffs, so physically one was extremely comfortable. The universities were open to foreign students so I was able to take what they called cursos para estranjeros. These were taught by topnotch professors who, for political reasons, were not allowed to be in the mainstream of the university. They were delegated to this somewhat sequestered program where they were not in constant contact with Spanish students. To have that kind of introduction to another country's history, and poetry, and theater was tremendously exciting. Spain was still restricted by Franco's policies in terms of any opening to the rest of Europe, but was certainly hospitable to foreign residents.

Internally we were very fortunate. We had a very wonderful Ambassador who inspired high morale in the staff. That was Robert Woodward and his wonderful wife Virginia. It was a delightful experience for a first Foreign Service post to have such an outstanding Ambassador and team.

Q: What did they do to set that kind of tone?

WILSON: They developed very warm personal relations with everyone on their staff in a non-hierarchical way. I remember when I had son John. The hospital had a policy that only grandparents were allowed to visit patients, but the Woodwards posed as the grandparents of the child even though they were closer to our age than parental age, just to extend the courtesy of calling on a member of the Embassy who was in the hospital. That was such a very gracious personal gesture, and still remembered with great pleasure.

Q: Was it a formal Embassy in the sense of calling a lot and that sort of...

WILSON: It was formal in the sense that calls were encouraged and so graciously handled that they were joyful. There was no reproach if anyone neglected the niceties that were prevalent in that day. There were still calls among members of the staff on each other, as well as on their foreign counterparts. I had never been called on, and I remember my horror of being in a hotel room with three children ill, and one dropping water bombs out the window, to get a call from the desk that Madame so-and-so was down there to make her call on me and would I please attend to her. And my anxiety of leaving the children, and knowing I dare not invite anyone into the havoc, the devastated war scene that was our hotel room, and then feeling quite perplexed about what she was there for, and what was expected. Unfortunately she was a European by origin and very accustomed to making calls and said, "I don't know why I should have to call on you, but your husband outranks my husband, and so I am here." It was a short call.

Q: Did you get training of any sort before you went on that first post?

WILSON: You touched on a sensitive point. I had absolutely no training. I had no idea what was expected of the diplomatic wife, of me individually. I had no idea as the wife of somebody who had responsibilities to other people, what was expected of me. I imagine I did everything wrong, everything awkward, and was forgiven just because the general morale in the post was so warm and friendly. I harbor a very deep resentment that anyone is put in a position of such ignorance when it could have been corrected with one day of classes.

Q: Was it that there weren't classes, or that you didn't know about them, or you couldn't go to them?

WILSON: All three. There was no way to be packed up and out on two weeks notice with so many little children, and no baby-sitting. I remember being given absolutely nothing. I don't think I saw the State Department Protocol Handbook until our next post after that.

Q: Did anybody at the post, your good Ambassador's wife try and teach you?

WILSON: Only by modeling.

Q: Then she was a fine model.

WILSON: Mostly what she had to teach was successful ways to relate to the Spanish population and its different categories because she spoke the language well. She was well read in its history, she was gracious in their forms of etiquette, and very popular with them. I think maybe one of the primary roles of an Ambassador's wife is to demonstrate how to be gracious and courteous, and respected.

Q: Did you feel like you were typical of people going out at that period? That everybody was going out sort of flying on their own, or did you feel like you were a bit unusual?

WILSON: No. I felt this was the prevalent pattern.

Q: And certainly what you saw with other people who arrived?

WILSON: Right.

Q: Were you typical to the degree that you got involved in the local culture, or did lots of people just not bother?

WILSON: I think lots of people did not bother.

Q: ...bother, much to their own loss. Was there an atmosphere within the Embassy that encouraged it, going out?

WILSON: I think the atmosphere was everyone do their own thing. Whatever is useful for that person ultimately would be useful for the whole Embassy but we'll all pull together when it's a reception at the residence, or it's an annual occasion of Spanish-American interchange. But there was no sense that in order to be a good Foreign Service spouse you had to do this, or had to do that.

Q: Where do you think that sense of obligation came? Because what you're saying, and what I remember hearing from that period, are two different things. I remember hearing, starting in that period in the '60s, this enormous sense of wives will do this, wives will do that, wives will do the other.

WILSON: I think that came from the hierarchy, and I think there's a great deal of merit in building a structure where roles are clearly defined, and there is a common commitment to the overall goals of the mission. But it seemed to me it degenerated into an exploitation of rank, and abuse by ambitious women who enjoyed domineering.

Q: And who had no other outlets.

WILSON: Very possibly, because they had no other outlets. And I think in the case of Mrs. Woodward, she was a person of so many parts, and such genuine intelligence herself, that her self-esteem had nothing to do with her husband's rank.

Q: So it just simply wasn't an issue at that post, at that time.

WILSON: It was not an issue at that post, at that time.

Q: Where did you go from Spain?

WILSON: From Spain we went to Bangkok, and there was a very different climate, partly because it was such a very different culture, and because Jim was DCM which is a tricky role to play. At that time I did have in hand the Protocol Manual so I felt a little less amateurish about the forms. It was not a happy post for me personally because of the relationships within the Embassy. Fortunately, from the family viewpoint, and the children's enjoyment, they were two very pleasant years. It was not as easy to get involved in Thai culture because of the language barrier, and the differences. So, I think, I concentrated basically on the children and their activities, which were mostly around horseback riding and the local polo club. Except for being involved with the selection of Fulbright scholars (I served on the selection board) and of course the wives club. Then I got very interested in children's literature because none exists in the Thai language, trying to find ways to encourage publication of children's literature in Thailand. And I was working with some educators in a normal school when we were somewhat abruptly transferred to Manila. That was a direct transfer.

Q: You talked about the role of the DCM being a tricky role. Isn't the role of the DCM's wife doubly tricky, and would you like to talk about that a little bit?

WILSON: Well, if I can do that without being involved in personalities. I think over the next years, following our Bangkok tour, I learned a great deal about it, because we had three Ambassadors to whom my husband was deputy, and with each one the nature of the relationship changed. I found, because we were very fortunate in having three couples that were a joy to work with, that if personal understanding and communication was good between the DCM wife and the Ambassador's wife, it worked very, very well. But there needed to be a discussion of expectations, availability, and mutual interest, in order for that to happen.

Q: Would you say therefore there were Ambassadors' wives who were both demanding and non-specific in how they wanted those demands? Is that what I'm hearing?

WILSON: What you're hearing is that in this earlier instance, I mentioned there was not a concordance of expectation. Maybe because it had never been thought through, or discussed.

Q: And because the Ambassador's wife in question hadn't had any guidance either in what her role might be.

WILSON: Or had had the wrong kind of guidance with the stress on management, rather than motivation, or leadership by example. A heavy obligation to direct without much help in how to do that.

Q: Would you say that was typical?

WILSON: I've heard so many gruesome stories, Margaret, of the so-called dragon ladies, that I think it was not a unique phenomenon. Hopefully it wasn't a common one.

Q: Can you, without giving names or places, and by saying that it is a story that you heard, tell some dragon lady stories?

WILSON: One of my favorites I heard from a GSO, who said he spent his mornings in great trepidation awaiting a phone call from the Ambassador's wife who would summon him daily to the residence and insist he have a martini at 10:00 in the morning, and then listen to the petty grievances about the servants, who were probably the best available in the entire country. No amount of pleading of excuses of other work would ever exonerate him from this morning ritual, which he truly dreaded. It was inappropriate in view of his many, many responsibilities to the whole mission.

One of my own experiences was being part of a card playing party that dragged on and on and it reached a point in the very late afternoon when I was due to take a child to a dental appointment. I asked to be excused because the child was already late, and being told, "Sit down, we will finish the rubber." There were not foreign guests at the table: it was other equally impatient American wives anxious to be on their way. I resented that.

Q: There was a lot of resentment building, I think, in this period, but there was also a lot of creative activity going on. I would suspect from what I've heard about Manila, and you, and the various people there, that this was a two-sided story. So having told stories about dragon ladies, let's balance it out a bit.

WILSON: Yes, I'd love to because Manila was such fun. Again, because there was encouragement of initiative and creativity on the part of everyone on the staff, outside of hierarchy. Hierarchy is so confining. In Manila a group of us organized a summer day camp because there weren't adequate outlets for children. We got the older children to be counselors for the younger children, and there were mothers who had their Red Cross lifesaving license. There were mothers who were certified pre-school teachers, etc. We had over 300 children enrolled in the program. The school gave us the school buses, and the Embassy let us use the recreational facility, and it was a smashing success, and a lot of fun for everyone involved. That took the work of maybe 45 mothers to direct that. We started a job program with private industry. This was before Embassies created summer jobs so we just created them in the whole community. Because of labor laws it was impossible to use company funds to pay youngsters but personal funds went from one father's pocket to a friend's son's pocket, and vise versa. All the youngsters then had some job experience and the letter of reference for their return to the United States. They could hope when seeking a job at Roy Rogers, they wouldn't be turned down because they didn't have a letter saying they'd had a successful job history.

Q: This was in the late '60s?

WILSON: Right.

Q: When did you move from there?

WILSON: We left Manila in '70.

Q: Manila is a large post, one of the largest in the world. Large numbers with families. Were you the one that was responsible for developing community activity and community cohesion? Was that a stated responsibility? What sort of things, or was it the Ambassador's wife who did it, or how did that work?

WILSON: It worked in so many ways. It was a stated objective in terms of my husband's briefing. Because this was a large mission, it was important whenever possible to generate a spirit of commitment to the whole. We had safe-havening Vietnamese wives of Americans stationed in Vietnam. We had a huge AID mission. We had the largest Peace Corps mission in the world at that time. It was a big operation. We also had the Veterans Administration. So it was important that we all knew each other, and we were all aware when anyone had concerns to be there to backstop. The whole spirit, and it was very definitely encouraged by the Ambassadors we served with, was to build a sense of common identity. And then, who knows where talent comes from? It just seemed to work.

In part because there was an important recreational facility that everyone used, and when the same people are using a swimming pool, a tennis court, the laundromat, friendships are formed and a spirit is generated.

Q: So it wasn't one of the key things I think I've heard you say, that when hierarchy alone functions things are very difficult in a post. And when somehow the hierarchy is broken down, generally by the wives, that a different kind of community evolves?

WILSON: I think maybe even more crucial is the attitude of the Ambassador. If he gives recognition to the important role played by every cog in the machine, the machine is well oiled. And when the procedural workings of an Embassy encourage, on every level, the best of everyone's thinking, you generate that kind of climate. I do think it has to be modeled at the top and when you open up the system without breaking the skeleton that holds it all together, I think you get the best of both worlds. There is a need for hierarchy. Someone has to be accountable for decision making, and for scheduling goals and the timetable. But it certainly is gratifying to be part of an operation where everyone's opinion is valued.

Q: In the three successive posts that you had, would you say that you saw changes in the attitudes of wives as they saw their roles?

WILSON: Not really; not until we came back to Washington and then it was very exciting to find that there was a basic questioning of the value of the closed hierarchy, the deprivation of women's talents in the system. I think it grew out of the civil rights movement and it somewhat surprised me in its ferocity when I first encountered it. The emotion became contagious, and I felt there was a wave for change that occurred among wives, among some men.

Q: Within the Foreign Service?

WILSON: Within the Foreign Service, and within society at large, which has made some basic changes.

Q: Before we go on to talk about those winds of change, would you see if you could define how you saw your own role, if you thought about it, those kinds of abstract terms? And how you think most Foreign Service women of the '60s saw themselves, what they saw their job as, if they saw it as a job at all?

WILSON: I think one saw it more as a part of marriage. I saw it as doing what helped my husband get his work done in a way that never dishonored his name. As a mother to make sure my children didn't in any way basically offend the host country by some mischievous behavior. I hope I never said, "Now behave like little emissaries from the country." I hope I did say, "It's important to be courteous, you're a guest here." I saw myself as having a role towards other wives in the mission, of being a good member of the club. I felt some obligation to myself to take advantage of the opportunity of being in another country to explore it, not to plunder it in the sense of walking away with treasures. This became a great issue in the Philippines at that time. There were feelings that Americans were purchasing too many of the local porcelain treasures.

I think one of my goals, and it was characteristic of other wives, was to work hard to make a few lifelong friendships with people of the country. Friendships within the mission always came naturally and very bountifully, and maybe that was seen as one of the great rewards, that sense of belonging to a close-knit group, which one misses away from post.

Q: Do you feel like your statements of how all of this worked for you would be typical of women you knew?

WILSON: Very typical. I met only a few of what I would call overly ambitious women for their husband's careers. I thought the majority were committed, hard-working wives who were basically enjoying the ride.

Q: Saw themselves though as working in a sense?

WILSON: Yes, as I think any housewife would feel that they were working for the family unit.

Q: Did being a Foreign Service wife, particularly the wife at that time and in that place, take a lot of time?

WILSON: What took a lot of time, and this was particularly true during the months when Jim was Chargï¿½, was the social life which was exhausting and had many negative aspects in the sense it took time you wanted to have with your children.

Q: Can you tell a little bit about this subject?

WILSON: The social life affected almost every day, one luncheon, two receptions, and a dinner, sometimes a coffee, sometimes an afternoon lecture in the middle of this. Jim and I worked out a system whereby he would try very hard to always be home for lunch with the children and they did come home for lunch from school, so I could do the ladies clubs etc., over the luncheon hour. We tried always to have time before the reception hour began to help with homework and a little time with the children, and whenever possible a weekend. But there were stretches when it would be 32 nights in a row out before we'd have an evening home. The children resented that very much, and on reflection I feel we were perhaps overly conscientious in the seditious pursuit of our social responsibilities. I wish it would have been possible just to say weekends were family time. But it's very difficult to do that, there being important visitors from the United States, or the Ambassador has a function and wants you there. So you just tried very, very hard to be as available as you could with the little time.

Q: And it wasn't just social life with Filipinos either, was it?

WILSON: The Philippines are unique, as well you know having enjoyed it too, in its hospitality toward Americans even though that hospitality is quite ambivalent. I don't think in any of the posts we served was there such a constant intermingling with Americans. So certainly more frequently it was a Philippine affair rather than an all-American affair.

Q: What about third countries, the Diplomatic Corps?

WILSON: A lot of that: the usual annual days for each Embassy and then the Foreign Ministers' receptions, and always Mrs. Marcos had several jaunts.

Q: What was Mrs. Marcos like?

WILSON: Mrs. Marcos was always handsome to look at, always provocative in her interests. She was definitely a nicer person when we first arrived than she became later. I think she was the perfect model for Lord Acton's principle of that absolute power ["Absolute power corrupts absolutely"], and I think I first became very uncomfortable with her in the Malacanang palace looking at some art works that she had purchased - one could only assume with public funds - that had attached to them a label saying, "Property of Imelda Marcos." So when you saw a fifteenth century German ivory triptych, which was of museum quality, marked "Private Property" it made one very apprehensive for the Philippine people.

I have some amusing memories of Mrs. Marcos. She pretended never to know who I was unless I stood with my husband, and then she would embrace me and call me by my first name. I had the duty occasionally of escorting her to functions at the Embassy, or the residence, and we had always interesting conversations about her pet projects. She came most alive when she danced, and she was really a spectacular dancer. I think she took frequent lessons. My husband is an old box-square dancing school kind of dancer, and it's his least favorite occupation, and so when we're at a social function where dancing is on the menu he tends to hide behind potted palms, deep in political discussions. Well, there was a wonderful party at the residence, given by Ambassador Soapy Williams for the visiting head of the Peace Corps and it was the only time the Marcoses attended a function at the residence, and it was dancing with a marvelous orchestra. Ambassador Williams somehow or other persuaded Mrs. Marcos - she had to ask Jim Wilson - to dance, and then he found me working another part of the party and said, "You've got to come and watch." I can remember just nearly doubling over with laughter, seeing Mrs. Marcos shimmying up and down, leaping into the air, and just absolutely remarkable, rocky and rolling, and my husband beet red doing his little box-square. She was aware of how amusing this whole situation was, so she accentuated her dancing and was really having fun watching how embarrassed Jim was.

I'm sorry that a woman with her drive and her political skills became corrupt. She had the potential of being a great leader for Asia. It is a great loss. I thought her husband a very, very quick witted, bright, adept politician. If they had had their country's interest at heart instead of, unfortunately, their own, the Philippines might face a better future. One can only be very concerned.

Q: You were there at the point after the '69 election when it began to go sour?

WILSON: Right. We were very conscious of the corruption of the press, the history of corruption in the legislature, and had the feeling that with a strong leadership there might be the possibility of changing very Asian village patterns toward a more modern model. The second inaugural took place just before we left. No martial law. There were wonderful projects for cleaning up the slums, rural beautification, job creation. There were some positive indicators that this economy was on the rise, and that public housing was going to be extensively developed. Well, it all went very fast down the drain with martial law. The corruption was evident when we left. I remember "the blue ladies" living in somewhat tremendous terror that if they didn't perform, their husbands wouldn't get export permits, or government approvals for whatever their business was. [The "blue ladies" were the social and political sycophants who surrounded Imelda Marcos. They traditionally wore blue, much as Corazon Aquino's supporters wear yellow today.] So the noose was tightening at that time, and one felt very badly for those who had integrity, and there were many in the cabinet and government at that time who were beginning to feel the erosion of the state.

Q: How do Foreign Service wives... how did you deal with watching all of this? Did you follow it closely? Did you try and stay out of it?

WILSON: I never felt qualified to discuss politics with politicians, but I do feel the wife has a wonderful opportunity to listen, and to move in circles where it's difficult for an Embassy official to go. So I just loved poking around, social work projects, and the Tondo [slum area in Manila], art galleries, the university. Just listening and then being able to come back and summarize this for Jim. Whether it was relevant or not, I'll never know.

Q: How did you find time to do it all?

WILSON: Because we had seven servants, that's why. That was glorious. The Philippines are such family people. You could go many places with children, and that was wonderful. I spent a lot of time riding horseback with the kids, and playing tennis, and we were at the swimming pool every day. There was time when they were in school to go off on little sorties.

Q: They were by that time in high school?

WILSON: Yes. Johnny, when we left, finally made it to kindergarten. We had many experiences with pre-schools and in Manila we started a nursery school at the Union Church. That was a fun project because there wasn't a coop nursery school then, and there was a need for one, so a group of us got together and started a nursery school, and the church was eager to have one in its facility.

Q: Expatriate only, or...

WILSON: We had a scholarship for a Philippine student and that was to satisfy, I think, our own cravings to try to integrate the school. It turned out to be not very successful for the child who was chosen because of the gap in family income levels. Because it was a coop and mothers did such things as clean the toilets and serve food, Philippine mothers were not attracted. They thought if they were upper class, educated Filipinos, their image would be damaged in their children's eyes to be seen doing menial work. In the third year of the school we did attract some Philippine families who had lived in the U.S.

Q: You left the Philippines. Is there anything else? You had this set of three posts overseas?

WILSON: That was it. We had four years in Paris, attached to the Embassy military, but with the Foreign Service we were just at those three.

Q: Before we go on to coming back here and what you did since, is there anything that I haven't asked about?

WILSON: That's more than anybody will ever want to know.

Q: That you think ought to be talked about? You obviously made conscious time with the children. Was this the first priority, and can you give me some sense of how you put priorities on things?

WILSON: I think the children have always been the first priority, and then Jim, and I think that's true of most people. The only time I've ever heard a Foreign Service wife cry was to confess, "I left a child and I shouldn't have because I thought I had to be at the residence."

Q: Did you feel torn a lot?

WILSON: I felt torn quite often, and I've heard so many women say they were torn; even women who became wives of very, very senior men would say, "Looking back, my one heartbreak was that I left a child once when I knew I shouldn't have."

Q: Can you give me an example of a specific time when you felt torn.

WILSON: Yes. When children couldn't finish a homework assignment and they really needed adult tutorial help. To say, "I'm awfully sorry, I can't stay and help you do your math. I have to go." You try to get up early and do it, but sometimes you couldn't. And maybe in the long run that doesn't hurt children, to fail a few times and have to develop their own skills in coping with that. I think on reflection my children only gained from being in the Foreign Service. I see no indication that they were in any way short-changed.

Q: Did you work at seeing that they weren't short-changed, that they were a part of the country?

WILSON: No more than any other mother would. Very involved in the schools, always a room mother, always a chaperon for trips, worked in the library as a volunteer. Did substitute teaching - they were that desperate. It wasn't very often and if I had had more ability I would have loved to have taught in the overseas school.

Q: Do you see some continuity in the three posts in patterns, and could you try and decide for me whether those were continuity in your own family patterns, or whether it was some continuities in the Foreign Service?

WILSON: No, I don't see continuities in the Foreign Service. I think it's circumstantial, depending on the chemistry of a particular post, at a particular time, with particular leadership.

Q: So then you came home?

WILSON: Then we came home. Very excited to be home, but it was a dreadful first year because we all had re-entry shock going from seven servants to mother doing everything, and children saying, "Why isn't my underwear ironed?" It was a difficult transition, and we had two extra children with us for the first four months while their family looked for a house. We weathered it but I reached the point one day embracing the washing machine when I said, "This is not what life is meant to be forever," and marched out that very afternoon for a job interview. It was at that time that I first heard about the Foreign Service Institute course for women - wives.

Q: Which course had been going on all this time.

WILSON: Which had been going on and I'd never been able to attend mostly because I didn't even know it was there. So I decided to indulge myself and leave the great washing machine and take the course. It was so stimulating, so gratifying, so important in helping one process the feelings, the memories, the experiences, that I was just 100 percent intoxicated with my two weeks there.

Q: Who was teaching at that point?

WILSON: Dorothy Stansbury was chairman, and Alison Raymond Lanier came down from New York to run one workshop on "How do you Handle Some Problems at a Post?" - with family adjustment, with filling in activities that aren't part of the local environment, etc. A week later I got a phone call saying would I like to come work at the Wives Seminar - this out of the blue while I was pouring through the help wanted ads. I nearly fell through the telephone. I was delighted with this possibility. I went to work part time because I still had John in second grade. Dorothy Stansbury was exciting to work for because she was a genuine and very ardent feminist. I had never known one before. She had been a USIS officer and had served in France. She was somewhat involved, if not consumed, by the beginning struggle of women professionals in the Service to fight what they thought was discrimination. I learned a great deal from her anger. Being part of the Wives Seminar was a continuing education. The prestige of the State Department lured important people in all fields of endeavor to come and speak. It was simply a feast to sit in that classroom month in and month out and every day hear new presentations, new facts, new understandings, new insights to how America was working and not working, and enjoying knowing there were wives going out who had that under their belt.

Q: Can you tell me what the wives course was doing at that point, and how that was organized then?

WILSON: It was basically American studies. It was designed by Mary Vance Trent, a Foreign Service officer, when it was first decided that it was appropriate for spouses to have some preparation for service abroad. [Mary Vance Trent established the first congressionally approved spouse training program at the Foreign Service Institute in 1962.] The emphasis always was on what is the society you are representing, what is its political structure, its intellectual history, its artistic heritage, with some additional information on the mechanics of the Foreign Service, mostly protocol. Over the years it evolved into much more on the mechanics so that spouses had information about moving and transfer of effects, regulations, allowances, so they could take a pro-active, rather than a reactive, role in their family's moves. It also had much more emphasis on social problems in the United States, rather than the flag waving American dream, which psychologically seems to me is part of helping people lose their arrogance, and temper their pride.

Q: I noticed in the first 45 minutes that we talked that you talked about lots of things, but you didn't particularly ever mention representing your country. Did you not think in terms of representing your country, or has your notion about that changed?

WILSON: No, it hasn't changed. That was always very much in the conscious mind. Partly because of my husband who has always been - I don't like to use the word chauvinist - deeply patriotic, deeply loyal, deeply committed. I think his years in combat gave him a tremendous sense of duty and that has been probably the ruling factor in his whole life. I think the reason why I didn't mention my own sense of country - I can't fathom, unless it's so pervasively subconscious. I think that's one of the reasons why the Foreign Service is fun, rewarding. You feel important because you are out there as a representative, conscious of the fact that you better show the best of American family life, the best in American manners wherever you go. But I'm very offended by people who wave the flag because I think it demeans one's own ideals for one's country because it's often abused in tawdry, jingoistic flag waving. This is what I'm referring to.

Q: When you stepped into this training course, as a part time person, you were suddenly helping other women have what you hadn't had.

WILSON: Exactly, and with a really firm sense of advocacy, particularly with helping women get language training. I can remember going to the school of languages so many times saying, "Please won't you let Mrs. Smith get into this course. She's going to be the only person at her post, and she's going to have to do all these things without language unless you let her in," and encountering this total stonewall. "These courses are geared for the employees and not dependents." And the lack of recognition that often the language barrier is more significant for the spouse than the employee who works in an English environment inside the office. One of the great joys was in my eight years in the Foreign Service Institute to see that turn around. It was a total turn around over many, many dead bodies.

Q: It has reverted again.

WILSON: Has it reverted? Oh, I can't bear that.

Q: It has reverted simply because it's even more back on [a] space-available basis because of the budget.

WILSON: It's so unfair, and it's so shortsighted, and it's such poor economy. And the heartbreak, and the pain for women who go out there and have to cope with marketing, and schooling, and housing, and not being able to communicate - dreadful. I'm sorry to hear that.

Q: I'm sure it's not back to what it was in the early '70s but it isn't...

WILSON: It was rare for a wife to get in a language course, and it was then usually to accommodate numbers, because you couldn't run a course without a certain number of bodies. I became very unpopular fighting that, but the whole attitude was dependents were a burden and the less said the better.

Q: This was 1971?

WILSON: Right, and we owe much to a few individuals who changed the climate, and again I come back to leadership. It certainly takes a surge from the ranks but when you get a wave of the hand from on high, doors tend to fly open much more quickly.

Q: Who would you like to give credit to?

WILSON: I'd like to give a lot of credit to Gay Vance, Mrs. Cyrus Vance, who just very quietly said, "I'd like to take the Wives Seminar." I remember being reprimanded for not having a delegation to greet her at the door, but I said, "She wanted to come and be a student, not make an official visit." She came, and she enjoyed, and she was part of the class, and so did many other senior wives. But it was her example that put the spotlight...

Q: That would be '76 or '77?

WILSON: Yes, it was '76 and '77. Betty Atherton was another person who gave great help. Molly Whitehouse, and then there were all those wonderful people like Stephanie Kinney, Cynthia Chard, and Hope Meyers, and Margaret Sullivan herself with your article which did a tremendous amount to change attitudes. And the editor of the Foreign Service Journal who had the sense to print it.

Q: Shirley Newhall, I think, in her own way did enormous good. I like to go back to '71 because I would like to know what you know about what was going on that led up to the 1972 directive?

WILSON: What happened were a few people who kept asking questions, who kept saying, "Why can't I have a language course? Why aren't I reimbursed for baby sitting expenses when I'm preparing myself to be helpful to the U.S. mission abroad?" People within the system, as well as people who were dependents. And then the fact that women Foreign Service Officers were beginning to organize [Women's Action Organization], and Allison Palmer's famous lawsuit about discrimination and promotion and training opportunities after all these years. The Secretary's Open Forum Panel, which led to the '72 Directive, was also helpful.

Q: Do you remember any particular names that stand out?

WILSON: Hope Meyers was one of the originals, though she swears it wasn't until after '72, that she wasn't here then.

Q: The '72 Directive was one thing and then the period just after '72. Is that when the Directive was?

WILSON: Yes. I must have gone to work just after that. Maybe it was '72 when I started. I'll have to look at my records to see when I first went to work. And then another advance was made when Ambassador's wives were included in the Ambassadorial briefing. That took a decision from on high, and that was important.

Q: Tell me about that.

WILSON: I wish I could remember the circumstances. Normally there were briefings for Ambassadors and there must have been a group of wives who said, "We need to come too." They must first have been opened up in about '76. Again, the principal authors I can't identify. If I had my office files I could give it to you. I don't have any files; they must be there.

Q: It might be worthwhile asking Barbara Hoganson to check a few of those dates.

WILSON: Maybe Fanchon Silberstein might also. Dorothy Stansbury is no longer alive, alas. Jean Shallow, who was involved after Mary Vance Trent, I've lost touch with. Jean German has now moved to Austin, Texas. We will have to rely on the files. There was a history file way back when. Another name is that of Mary Buchanan, who preceded Mary Vance Trent. She is to my knowledge still in a nursing home in Richmond. [Mary Routh Buchanan was co-coordinator of spouse training, 1964-68.]

Q: The poor person. The course evolved. What sort of issues evolved? What sorts of evolution did you see in what women were talking about?

WILSON: There was always the definition of the role of the wife at issue. The other was how do you accommodate career needs with separation from the scene of your work to an overseas post? Or how do you adapt those career interests? How do you build up a job resume overseas as a Foreign Service wife? And much more on how do you create the environment overseas that meets your expectations? So again, empowering people when they go to post to make changes, to make that post more compatible. That wouldn't have been on the agenda ten years prior to that.

Q: What do you credit this really remarkable upsurge to? Because it did happen: when it happened, it happened very quickly.

WILSON: It happened within two or three years. I think it all came from the civil rights movement, which spread over into the feminist movement. I think when it swept the Foreign Service, it was sweeping everywhere else. We are just experiencing that liberation and it is a liberation because it's activating talents that were suppressed. The Foreign Service is certainly richer, although I think we went through a period where we were throwing the baby out with the bath water. I think we have to keep some structure, some formality, some hierarchy, for it to function well. But with so much flexibility that everybody can find their appropriate creative niche in it. I think it got to the point where senior wives were overburdened and became hesitant to ask anyone to help them. They were feeling very isolated, and very abused.

Q: The system faulted for a while.

WILSON: It didn't change in terms of the burden being on the senior wife. It's interesting that we all used to say, "How does it work when a bachelor goes out? How do you operate a residence and handle the representation? Or how, when somebody like Ambassador Ridgway, a female, is in charge of a mission, does it work?" And, of course, it worked because they were able people and found alternative ways to organize entertainment. And when we think of all the heartbreak there had been over the course of 150 years of impelling wives to make hors d'oeuvres and trot them over to the function, and now it's so simply done.

Q: Did wives really do a lot of that, or did people simply... did it have more effect as a story, or as a reality?

WILSON: I think there was reality behind the story. I remember one woman complaining she had to be in evening clothes, bring her goodies over, and be on standby in case a guest failed to show - then she was to be seated with the guests, otherwise she was to go home.

Q: Yes, I've heard that one too. I don't like normally to get involved in a comparison question, but it seemed to me of the six Ambassadors wives that we were related to - six or seven - two of them were genuine certified...

WILSON: ...dragon ladies?

Q: Throughout the Service known as dragon ladies, and I've seen them each in their moments. But I've always felt that the dragon lady notion was serious and powerful, but it was at least as powerful in its myth quality as it was in its day-to-day reality. And that most of us knew more stories about other people than we experienced ourselves. And that it was the story factor that was as important as the reality factor.

WILSON: You're saying two out of seven: that's a pretty high ratio.

Q: Yes, I guess you're right. The others were just so good.

WILSON: And what a joy it is to be associated with somebody that leaves you with that feeling about them.

Q: How would you say in the eight years that you were politicking? What would you say were the things you achieved? You've talked about language classes. In what other ways were you able to make the...

WILSON: We got baby-sitting reimbursement for a spell. That was very important, both as a moral victory and as a concrete way to help young families trying to prepare for overseas. I take greatest pleasure in seeing the Overseas Briefing Center, and would like to pay tribute to the Canadian government because that was what inspired the Overseas Briefing Center.

Q: What was it called before that?

WILSON: It was always the Wives Seminar. The Seminar in a way should be distinct from the Center because the Center is repository of information rather than a teaching curriculum. I had heard about it through SIETAR when we were exploring training programs in different governments. I was delighted to be asked to serve on the SIETAR committee to select its first executive director and attended some of the first meetings when we were trying to shape the organization. But in the course of SIETAR's deliberations it was apparent the Canadian government had some very exciting, very original, experiential training programs for its technical assistance employees going overseas. So when SIETAR held its second annual conference - it was in a resort not too far from Ontario - I asked some of the Canadian participants to talk about their program, and they mentioned that they had this office where they had visual and printed materials on the places where they sent their personnel, and I asked if I might please visit it. So after the conference they kindly drove me to Ontario, and we toured the establishment, and it was so apparent that if you could have pictures of housing at a post, information on the school, the medical situation, what's available in the stores, etc., etc., at hand as you pack, it would save you a great deal of worry and mistakes.

Q: Why was this better than the Post Report?

WILSON: Because the Post Report has never been an entirely reliable document, as we all know. It had been written by people aware of Congressional review, and review by the host government - informal review. So it's very delicately worded and it takes a certain amount of experience to know how to read a Post Report. It doesn't really answer every question for everybody going there. It became a big push to see if we could duplicate the Canadian facility, and improve on it in the Foreign Service Institute. The vision was that it would be available to the American public, not the casual tourist, but the American business family going abroad. Thanks to William Broderick, who was head of the School of Professional Studies, who was a wonderful leader and said, "Gee, that's a good idea. Come up with a firm proposal and let's see what I can do to help." And to Larry Dutton who took over the Wives Seminar when it was transferred to Area Studies. And to Ambassador Ted Eliot in Afghanistan who was responsible for the very first videotape that was made for the Overseas Briefing Center. That was done by an AID photographer who was given free range to use his own creative ability to make a video tape of what life was like at the post for Americans stationed there. It was so well done, so useful, that when it was shown to Ambassadors going out to other missions they felt they had to do as well in order to serve their own staffs. As a result of that it began to snowball. If we didn't get good videotapes we got carrousels of slides showing what one wanted to see at the post. Now, today, that Center is a very useful depot of information.

I take pleasure also in the fact that the cultural surveys were started.

Q: What's a cultural survey?

WILSON: Cultural survey is not exactly the right term. I'm trying to think what we called it...it's a short paper summarizing what one needs to know as an American about social customs when one arrives at post. This whole thing grew out of the fact that we had so many brilliant women serving overseas who were good writers, or were good anthropologists. They were good cultural observers, who learned a lot about how to behave successfully as a foreigner in that country, and there was no way to get their wisdom to the next person going out there, because there was no incentive, there was no format for reporting this. So it was with great joy that a contract system was developed to pay something in small sums to some of these women to write a 30 to 50 page paper about customs at their post. It was even with malicious pleasure that I finally noticed that Foreign Service officers and directors of various area studies were beginning to refer to these studies as useful documents.

Q: The men really didn't think we knew much, did they?

WILSON: That's right.

Q: Would you elaborate on that a little bit? The male attitude...

WILSON: The male attitude was very exasperating, and I'm glad to see it has changed with the advancement of women. The recognition of these cultural studies is one strand of evidence. There was a sort of pooh-poohing that this was all going to be about wear your little white gloves, little lady. Then when these studies came in that touched on matters of importance for political reporting, and economic understanding, and general deportment at post, there was a total reversal of opinion.

Q: When did you start that? Do you remember?

WILSON: It must be about the time that your good son spent some time going through all the Peace Corps library materials to see what would be useful to the Overseas Briefing Center. That must have been in '77?

Q: '77 or '78, somewhere in there.

WILSON: The Peace Corps has done so many wonderful things in the training field. One of my most painful moments occurred when I was on a trip to Central America and I persuaded the Peace Corps director to allow an Embassy employee or an Embassy dependent to participate in the training that was given on site to Peace Corps volunteers. I hastened back to the Embassy, waving aloft this proud news, to be told by the senior official - to whom I brought this...

Q: ...tidings...

WILSON: ...of a post that will be nameless. "It is ridiculous for anyone in the Embassy to bother with Peace Corps training, because Embassy people don't need to know that sort of thing about the country. They deal on a very different level."

Q: You're saying something that's very interesting in terms of at least particular, and maybe a more general attitude within the State Department, about culture and the role of communications, and diplomacy. I really would like you to expand on that.

WILSON: Well, I do with pleasure. It's a subject of mutual passion for you and me, Margaret. I don't know how we overcome - there is a mind set, which I think is fortunately crumbling, but it prevailed for a long period, that the Embassy official is a political scientist, a diplomat, a scholar, who would use purely cognitive powers to analyze the activity taking place in a foreign country, which had absolutely nothing to do really with human relationships. I think the ideal diplomat was viewed as such a brilliant linguist and so witty, that he would automatically find entrï¿½e anywhere. There was no recognition of possibly different underlying assumptions, hypotheses, value systems, religious beliefs, not to mention surface behaviors, that were resistant to this approach. I think we have suffered because we have not, on a human-to-human emotional level, always been able to relate. I can remember, and I don't feel this shows any special insight on my part, reading in the paper about the Ratissage in Algeria, and saying the French are not going to stay there very long, I don't think. You can't humiliate Algerians in this public way without engendering such deep abiding hatred that they'd rather lose their life overthrowing you than anything else. That was when protesting Algerians, suspected of possible anti-French activity, were forced to run through parallel lines of armed men who would beat them with their billy sticks, in public. I said this to a political officer in our Embassy who said...

Q: In Algeria?

WILSON: No, in Paris, and was told, "Oh, no. The French will always be there because they're very skillful colonial governors. You don't understand." We missed the student riots in Mexico because we don't see a people in its complexity and sense of the whole tapestry.

We focus on government bureaucracies and the foreign policy formulation aspects and sometimes miss some of the big broad brush strokes that a sociologist, an anthropologist, a psychiatrist would pick up. I think a well-prepared Foreign Service officer would benefit enormously from training in cultural anthropology. I don't mean in skull measurements or some of those more esoteric necessities in the discipline, but in developing an appreciation and a sensitivity to the mind set of the other country.

Q: If the typical, ideal, Foreign Service officer was witty, a linguist, could gain entrï¿½e and knew all of these rather formal government to government things, what was the ideal officer's wife?

WILSON: Beautiful, elegant, well groomed, a linguist, witty, differential to her husband, and a superb cook.

Q: How many of those were there around?

WILSON: Enough to always make me feel very deficient.

Q: I almost would like to suggest it wasn't until you got really involved in pushing at FSI, there wasn't a whole lot of encouragement for wives to know culture either.

WILSON: That's right. I think all this is true in many professions. It's just now the health profession is learning that in hospitals you treat Hispanic patients differently, and black and white patients differently, etc. There was resistance in the Foreign Service Institute, although there were in the language school teachers who taught culture with language, and language as part of culture. Their classes were deeply enjoyed; it was interesting to note the enthusiasm they engendered. Before I left FSI a young man with a Peace Corps training background was hired on the staff to initiate more cross-cultural elements in all the programs. I rather suspect that Area Studies now has more units on the broad cross-cultural training than they had ten years ago, but still insufficient in that.

Q: You left in '80. When you left there, what was the percentage of time in the course? How was the course broken down in what you did in the Wives Seminar?

WILSON: We probably only had two out of the 20 sessions, morning sessions, on the non-mechanical aspects on the cross-cultural simply because you run out of time when there's so much to be covered in terms of the basic American studies. You can't really leap into the cross-culture without a sense of your own acculturation. So the two go hand-in-hand. I think what we hoped to do was provide a model that would enable the members of the class to pursue it on their own and to use when they moved into a post. It's interesting it was so often a topic that ignited the wives' interest and as a result all those studies evolved.

Q: Where are those studies available?

WILSON: They are available at the Overseas Briefing Center, and they are eminently readable and useful.

Q: And that's the only place? There's never been any attempt made to disseminate them further?

WILSON: Not to my knowledge.

Q: But the so-called Wives Seminar wasn't the only course that you taught?

WILSON: No, the other ones were again mechanics: Ambassador's briefings when one talked about the concerns of family and the adjustment cycle, the junior officer course when they were to be instructed in diplomatic niceties and how to entertain when overseas, and how to help at receptions.

Q: That was for the young employees without spouses? or...

WILSON: The A-100 course of newly inducted Foreign Service officers. That was basically it except for occasional invitations to CIA or the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Q: What about your later seminars on employment overseas and re-entry seminars?

WILSON: All these were generated by caring people who came through the Wives Seminar and said, "Look, there are other things that need developing." The most frequently offered ones were on re-entry shock for families, often done on Saturdays so fathers could come with the rest of their family. Then there were the ones on how to get into the employment market, and how to use your job skills when you're overseas. We had a few on leadership that were marvelous, and many thanks to people like Janet Lloyd for helping shape those. This was just to encourage more development at post of non-traditional support systems.

Q: Talk for me a little bit about the problem of re-entry for the Foreign Service.

WILSON: I think it hinges around a sense of being important when you're overseas because you are representing something bigger than yourself, and knowing you better keep up with foreign affairs because you're likely to be asked for an opinion, or at least a report on something.

So when you come back to the United States and you're just another person in the line at the local supermarket, there's a drop in self-esteem, not necessarily warranted, but inevitable. I think the sense of routine-ness and daily-ness in life after the excitement of living in a different world is hard to adjust to. My experience was that for adolescents and mothers, or the non-working member of the team, it can often take a year or so to get a new grasp on reality and role definition.

Q: We were talking about re-entry shock and loss of status.

WILSON: Yes, what else can one say? The drama drains out of life. It goes from a color TV to black and white, and then the problem of finding a job that's on the agenda when you've had a gap of 8, 10, 12 years from your field, and your connections are gone, and you may be starting out in a whole new neighborhood and have to get to know the schools and etc., etc. So one is strongly stretched during that period without the lovely sense of community you have at an overseas post.

Q: Joan, you were much involved in the politicking and negotiations that led up to the establishment of the Family Liaison Office. What do you have to say about the reasons that that came into being?

WILSON: It's interesting. I think maybe my reasons for wanting it were different from others. It was largely because of this cross-cultural ignorance that we lose so much time when we arrive at a post and we don't know how to go about doing things we have to do. That if we only could collect in one place the information that each of us so painfully acquires over a period of a year or so, that we would all be better served. I think some of the impetus for the Family Liaison Office came from a feeling that families needed a spokesperson because families were lost in the shuffle. Combining the two made it very sensible to have a voice for families in the inner-workings of the State Department, as well as a voice at post. But I think the exciting thing about the CLO is not only has it served to ease the way for families, but it has become a very useful tool for everybody at a mission, and not only people at a mission but the information accumulated helps all Americans who end up working in that country. I worry a little bit that we have put on another layer of bureaucracy and we had to have this because what should have been done, wasn't done. It's a little bit like having a Hospice movement which was needed because hospitals, nurses, and doctors weren't treating the dying properly, so we create another system to put in hospitals and communities to make dying a less dreadful thing for the families of the terminally ill. But when we all do our job properly in the health field, we don't need Hospices. I think in the same way if we managed bureaucracies in a way that favored families - were healthy for families - we wouldn't need to have family voices in the bureaucracy per se. But I am delighted that these services are now available, and I hope for families going out now, and in the future, it will be an easier experience.

Q: I hope it's going to be just as wonderful as it was way back when.

WILSON: We lose something if we make it too easy, too standardized.

Q: Why would you say the Foreign Service paid no attention to families, yet moved families?

WILSON: For the same reason they didn't promote equally able female Foreign Service officers. It was a blindness because of a primacy view of the male.

Q: And then a primacy view of the employee, and a view that the...

WILSON: The wife was there, not as a possession - not quite as bad as that view - but certainly as the adjunct, the helpmate. And she better be a helpmate, or out with that... (end of tape 1)

... to do everything we can to support families because we get better job performances as a result, quite apart from the human quality of enjoyment, and survival, and everything else.

Q: Can you document that?

WILSON: I was just reading the other day what the cost of tuition is at the American school in Madrid and it's over $10,000 per child.

So, of course, it makes a difference, the bottom line of the budget, the number of children.

Q: On the expense side, yes. Can you demonstrate, or what's the basis of your comment that you get a better employee if the family is happy?

WILSON: I think it's everyone's experience. A man who is worrying about whether his children are in trouble, or his wife is depressed, is going to be distracted from doing his work. Think of all the wonderful families at a post whose health as a family, whose warmth as a family, attracts the friendship of the nationals of that country. I reflect on some wonderful families I knew where their children's friendships through schools and sports, added to the range of understanding of that country in context, and set such a contrasting picture to our Hollywood vision of violence, and sex, and depraved youth. I remember once a guest saying, when I had to ask one of my children to fill in at a party, came to me afterward and said, "I know you apologized before you put your child next to me, and explained why, but you shouldn't apologize. It was a pleasure to see that there are nice young people in the United States because our picture is all based on films, and it's just nice to know there's another side to America." I think a buoyant family, outgoing, is a tremendous asset for the USA when they serve abroad, as I'm sure your family was, Margaret. Think of all the friendships our children have brought to us.

Q: What, in the final analysis, difference does it make to foreign policy of the United States, the friendships?

WILSON: You could ask that question about the student exchange, and people-to-people programs. In the cynical mood, you could say it doesn't make a difference. On the other hand, if we're building up a body of goodwill across the world, maybe there's a slight hesitation before you push the trigger, I don't know. It's an article of faith. I think we have to believe it makes a difference, or why bother?

Q: I know you haven't been abroad, to serve abroad, in a long time, but I know that you have in various professional capacities visited posts in the era of the working wife, and of the non-involved wife at post. What differences do you think that that has made in the Foreign Service, good and bad?

WILSON: I wish I'd seen more of that. My concern is always what happens to children in these situations where both parents are working so hard. I don't know how we're going to accommodate that because I would love to see both parents' talents used without the children suffering in the process.

From the consumer viewpoint visiting Embassies overseas, I see no change. I'm distressed by the security precautions which set such a barrier between the image of the Embassy and the people and I don't know what the answer is to that problem. I have an unrelated concern, and that is that we seem to have lost our sense of obligation to support the business community overseas, and have run into several statements of, "Oh, no. If you're not an Embassy employee, and you are just a business man, you're not allowed here." I think we're losing, or have lost, our preeminence in the international economic market because we're competing with governments where the whole government machinery supports business; to wit the Japanese, the West Germans. I think if we don't have a reversal on that aspect, we will be very very disadvantaged. Which is one reason why I think the Overseas Briefing Center should be in a very public location, or duplicated in the Department of Commerce, and the American Chamber of Commerce, and a few other places with maybe branches across the country.

I had an interesting experience in Hurghada, Egypt where I was doing a workshop for private business. It included some Japanese businessmen who were employees of a subsidiary of an American corporation. A Japanese participant at 11:00 in the evening asked me to review his notes. His notes were so meticulous and depth illustrated that I inquired why he was taking the trouble to do such a conscientious duplication of everything that had been discussed about Egypt during the day. He said, "Oh, because when I go back to Tokyo I share this with all of Japanese businessmen who might come to Cairo." Well, when you have companies no longer competing with each other, but all working for the ultimate national success in the export market, you recognize that we are retrograde in our information systems for business support.

Ultimately, for the Foreign Service, I think we're still in transition. I think women have not yet resolved the question of how they're going to balance career and parenting, even with greater support from husbands than has been the pattern. I think we're going to have a generation of children who have been handicapped by our confusion on this issue.

Q: You ran all of this course for eight years. What percentage of wives took it?

WILSON: Mathematically I can't answer that accurately. It was a very, very small percent. Because participants included not just Foreign Service, but very often large numbers from the Defense Intelligence Agency, some from AID, some from Drug Enforcement and other agencies. I would think less than five percent.

Q: That must have been frustrating.

WILSON: It was very frustrating, but that was five percent toward a better figure than zero.

Q: So that what you're saying in fact, is that most women, most spouses male or female, still go overseas with next to no training?

WILSON: Which is why one of the obligations we have is to have excellent orientation at post. And we have not made available methodology, or content, and again it depends on leadership. An Ambassador who is sensitive to this need encourages the development of good briefing that includes cultural information. But it's very hit or miss depending on the predilection of that current senior management.

Q: And, in fact, most officers go abroad without training. You're nodding your head and you're not saying anything.

WILSON: I'm agreeing with you, and I think it's lamentable.

Q: Is this a matter of oversight and lack of concern, or is it a matter of really thinking this isn't important?

WILSON: I think it must be a combination, and the fact that we don't have enough lead time to book some training in for an officer.

Whereas we know that we have to have a language officer there and allow for two years, or whatever is required to get that. But there certainly is no consistency in planning training.

Q: And it doesn't help you get promoted.

WILSON: Unfortunately.

Q: And training your wife doesn't help you get promoted.

WILSON: I'm afraid you're right. If it makes for a happier wife, that's worth something. You can't even mention the wife anymore.

Q: When you first heard about the '72 Directive, what was your reaction to it? Do you remember at all, it's been a long time now?

WILSON: My reaction was one of happiness that this had finally been formulated, and that it would relieve those situations where there was a dragon lady. It wasn't until maybe a half a year later that I recognized this was leading to unfair labor distribution, and causing considerable burden on some very fine senior wives. I thought what we need is open communication, and flexibility, and choices, and alternatives, and I think we've moved toward that. A senior wife can say, "The government doesn't require me to do this, and this isn't what I particularly enjoy doing, so I shan't." And she's no longer regarded as a faulty partner. I don't think we've sufficiently saluted wives who've decided to do this, or did it anyway, for many, many millions of hours of skilled labor. I just hope that anyone who chooses the Foreign Service finds it is process not the promotion that rewards. The excitement of living in another country, of learning the language, of reaching across to make friendships in a different world is why you do it, not any specific duty.

Q: A story like this is best told in story. You have a couple of stories of experiences of your own that illustrate that that you think of periodically.

WILSON: I have many wonderful memories, some of them quite exotic, and they all broaden tolerance for difference.

One of my favorite memories is walking a sunbathed jungle path in Thailand, and seeing my son, who then must have been eight years old, dancing with three very elderly ladies with betel nut stained mouths. All of them in a semi-trance of rhythmic ecstasy from the drum beat as we marched through the jungle on our way to the temple to take gifts to the priest, and thinking, "Here's a little American boy with freckles on his nose; he's totally at one with these three old ladies." They were dancing together: they could dance together for hours, with total joy and abandonment. Where else could that happen? And where else could a little boy have an experience like that? We got to the temple. We marched around it three times. We went in and gave our gifts to the priest. And then there was the fun of seeing what the priest would like for a present, for gifts are given only on this one day a year, and being amused to see scads of bubble gum, coat hangers, and toilet paper in the middle of nowhere. And my memory of that child belonging to those three ladies. His whole life is being changed by his ability to identify with the Philippines, with Thailand, with people who are different. I think he will probably end up one year going back there.

What other memories? Once I went, again in Thailand, to see a Moslem ceremony of walking on the fire. It was a religious occasion celebrating one of the descendants of Mohammed who wasn't in the official line of descent. So this is a sect. They beat their chests and chant the name of this descendent. It was only my second experience in mass hysteria, and as the beating goes on, and the chanting of the name, you yourself began to move with the rhythm. I watched people walk over live coals in bare feet, and I knew I could too. I didn't have to be restrained because we were asked to leave at that point because people were going into convulsions. But five more minutes I think I might really have tried it. That was such a deep shaking experience to realize that you can put aside reason in response to the chanting, the beating, the night light, the fire, the whole atmosphere. That makes me more understanding of mob action, negative or positive. I thought of that through the Tiananmen Square thing. These students were all swept up in this wonderful enthusiasm. If it had come in little pieces, they might have reacted on a more sedate level than risking their lives as courageously as they did. We can be carried along by something, and that was an extraordinary feeling.

Q: In terms of representation, do you have some stories about that?

WILSON: A funny one. In the Philippines I was asked if we would give a tea for the YMCA Philippine wives. That seemed like an appropriate thing to do, so I said, "Certainly." Well, a busy household, things needed doing and I went out to scrub the porch furniture where all the ladies were going to sit. About 15 minutes later the doorbell rang and one of the Philippine ladies had ridden by, and through a crack in the gate had seen me washing the furniture. They thought, "Oh, that's just terrible. She's out there washing the furniture; nobody should have to do that." So this whole delegation from the Y came to help me clean the furniture to give the tea because they thought the Minister's wife shouldn't be washing furniture. It was such a contrast in housekeeping styles. Of course, American women would clean their furniture before they had guests coming. But they thought they had over imposed, and they had to rally in force to come and prepare my house for their tea party. That was cute.

I had to give a speech once in Thailand, and I hate public speaking, and I was terrible nervous. I mentioned it to a dressmaker I saw before and she said, "My husband is a doctor and I'll get you some Valium and then you won't be so nervous." So I took the pill she gave me, and I got up on the podium to give my speech and felt so relaxed I began shuffling my cards and got them all out of order. I was absolutely tongue-tied. I didn't know where I was and just sort of grinned through my speech at the audience and fumbled through somehow. That was the last time I ever took a Valium before I made a speech.

Q: You've also done a lot of speaking.

WILSON: No, I still do very badly with that. Classroom is different. Presentation one-to-one is very different.

Q: If somebody asked you, Joan Wilson, how do you define yourself now?

WILSON: I had a nickname in FSI - I found out the day I retired from there - which was Sparkle Plenty - from Dick Tracy? Goody-goody two shoes, or something or other. That amused me rather than annoyed me because I'm congenitally a very happy person, without strong pulls toward career or any of these other things. I view myself as a very fortunate woman who had a wonderful life.

Q: Thanks to the Foreign Service, too.

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BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: James Morrison Wilson, Jr.

Spouse Entered Service:1958Left Service: 1979You Entered Service:1972Left Service: 1980

Status: Spouse of Retiree

Place and Date of birth: 11/11/24; New Rochelle, New York

Maiden Name:Rathvon

Parents (Name, Profession):

Nathaniel Peter Rathvon, Lawyer, President of RKO Pictures

Helen Hall Rathvon, sculptress, film director

Schools (Prep, University):

Rye Country Day School, Rye, New York

Vassar 1945, BA

George Washington University 1976, MA

Date and Place of Marriage: Paris, France, 1951

Profession: Information work (press, radio and film); training instructor

Children:

James Morrison, civil engineer

Julia, veterinarian

Peter, nuclear engineer and NRC inspector

Martha, physical therapist

John, business representative

Volunteer and Paid Positions held:A. At Post: Substitute teacher occasionally, room mother, etc. at children's' schools; volunteer director of church cooperative nursery school and of summer day camp; Whatever re wives' clubs, benefits

B. In Washington, DC: Intern with National Institute of Public Affairs 1944-45; Same with ECA, State, 1945; Training Instructor with FSI 1972-80; Part-time consultant with Business Council for International Understanding at American University - to present

Honors (Scholastic, FS related):

Phi Beta Kappa

End of interview